



Royal Holiday Bride (Reigning Men)

By Brenda Harlen

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King Dante Romero knew Marissa would be an ideal political bride—but his dreams were haunted by the masked seductress whose kisses had held so much passion. Then a heated embrace with the princess had him wondering if they had met before...and as the clock ticked down to their holiday wedding, the king realized that Marissa was the woman of his dreams—and the Christmas gift he couldn't wait to unwrap!

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Royal Holiday Bride (Reigning Men) By Brenda Harlen Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #603001 in eBooks
- Published on: 2011-12-01
- Released on: 2011-12-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Brenda Harlen is a multi-award winning author for Harlequin Special Edition who has written over 25 books for the company.

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Princess Marissa Leandres of Tesoro del Mar had a plan.

If her plan seemed a little desperate, well, that was probably because she *was* desperate. For too many years, she'd been a good princess, behaving as was expected of her, careful not to make waves in the family or do anything that might result in a scandal. After all, her brother, Cameron, had created more than enough of those.

But time was running out and if she had any hope of taking control of her life and her future, she had to make a move. And she knew she would never have a better opportunity than tonight's masquerade ball.

What better way for a princess to shed the restrictions inherent to her title and all of her own personal inhibitions than to be someone else—at least for one night?

Still, she couldn't deny that she was nervous. Actually, she was more than nervous—she was terrified. But she was also determined.

She hadn't planned to be a twenty-eight-year-old virgin. As a teenager experiencing the first stirrings of physical attraction, she'd been cautious. Not that she'd thought of her virginity as any great prize, but she hadn't been anxious to throw it away, either—especially not with the possibility of a reporter or photographer lurking around every corner.

While a lot of her friends boasted about going "all the way," she'd been content to wait, at least until she met someone really special. Unfortunately, that special someone never did cross her path, and now her mother was ready to offer her as a virgin sacrifice to Anthony Volpini, the Duke of Bel-lemoro.

Marissa shuddered at the thought. No way was she going to let that happen. She'd shared one brief kiss with Anthony a few years back, and the memory of that lip-lock was not a pleasant one. The prospect of experiencing anything more intimate with the lecherous duke made her skin crawl. So tonight, she was dressed as Juno. And the goddess knew what she wanted.

As she made her way toward the ballroom, the elegantly engraved invitation trembled in her fingers. Her first test would be at the door, where her cousin and his wife, Prince Rowan and Princess Lara, would be greeting each and every guest. If she could get past them—

No, she wouldn't let herself think *if*. She had to be confident. She had to ignore the butterflies frantically winging around inside her tummy and refuse to think about all the reasons she should abort her plan—and she knew there were many. She couldn't have second thoughts about what she was doing, because if she didn't go through with it tonight, she would forever be a helpless pawn in her mother's unending games.

Drawing in a slow, deep breath, she took a step forward as the line of guests advanced. She couldn't help but smile when she caught a glimpse of herself in one of the antique mirrors that lined the halls. She'd worried

that her plan would fail, that she would somehow be recognized, but as she curtsied to the prince regent and his wife and neither of them showed so much as a flicker of recognition, her butterflies began to settle.

Really, she had nothing to worry about. With the auburn wig, emerald-colored contacts and elaborate mask covering half of her face, her own mother wouldn't be able to identify her. Not to mention that the gold sandals on her feet added a full four inches to her usually petite five-foot-four-inch frame.

The one-shoulder toga-style gown hugged her breasts, nipped in at her waist and flowed to the floor with a slit halfway up her thigh on one side. It was more suggestive than revealing, but it made her feel sexy and daring—and nothing at all like the demure and conservative Princess Marissa.

She liked sensual fabrics and bright colors, but she didn't often wear them in public. She preferred to blend into the background, unnoticed by the paparazzi that had always shadowed her brother's every move. She'd certainly never worn anything so vibrant and bold, and she knew there was no way she could hide in the background in this outfit. But tonight she didn't want to hide—she wanted to be noticed. She wanted to be wanted.

Tonight, "the prim princess" was finally going to lose her virginity.

Dante Romero hated costume balls. He felt ridiculous enough in the finery he was required to wear for state functions without having to dress up and pretend to be someone else. As if being born a prince hadn't required him to do enough role-playing on a daily basis, he was now trapped in the role of King of Ardena.

It was his birthright and his burden, and one he hadn't expected to assume so early. Unfortunately, his father's health had rapidly deteriorated over the past few years to the point that King Benedicto and his advisers—and especially his doctors—had agreed it would be best for the country if he passed the throne to his son. It was a position Dante had been groomed for throughout his entire life, his inescapable destiny.

Not that he was looking to escape. He acknowledged and understood his responsibilities to his family, his people and his country. But he was barely thirty-two years old and he'd always thought he'd have more time before he had to accept those responsibilities—more time to be free before he gave his people a queen.

But his father had been unrelenting. He hadn't worried too much about his reputation as a playboy prince, but he was the king now and his country needed a queen. He needed a partner to share his life and a mother for his children—the future heirs to the throne.

That was one of the primary reasons he was in Tesoro del Mar now—not just to shake a few hands and smile for some photo ops, but to meet Princess Marissa Leandres, the only daughter of the Princess Royal and a cousin of the prince regent. His father was optimistic that he would find the princess "acceptable enough" to consider issuing a proposal of marriage, which would go a long way toward strengthening the ties between their respective countries.

It was, Dante understood, as good a reason as any for a king to choose a bride. Unlike the childhood song that claimed "first comes love, then comes marriage," Dante knew that it was more likely "first comes coronation, then comes marriage." The official ceremony had taken place only a few weeks earlier, and now the clock was ticking.

And so, at his father's insistence, he'd paid a thousand dollars for a ticket to this masquerade ball to benefit the Port Augustine Children's Hospital and dressed himself up like Jupiter, just because Benedicto was certain that Princess Marissa would be in attendance and because he had yet to figure out how to refuse anything his ailing father asked of him.

"She's not unattractive," his mother had informed him, although she'd seemed slightly less enthusiastic than her husband about the idea of the Tesorian princess as her son's bride. "Just a little more conservative than the women you usually date, but she is always stylish and well put together."

Unwilling to rely on his mother's description, he'd done some research on his own. Finding pictures of the princess hadn't been very difficult—though she wasn't frequently on the covers of the tabloids, she did make public appearances for noteworthy causes. It seemed that the Port Augustine Children's Hospital was one of her favorites.

He would agree that she wasn't unattractive. In fact, when he studied her face more closely, he realized that she was actually quite beautiful, if not the type of woman who would ordinarily catch his eye. Medium height, average build, dark hair usually tied back in a braid or secured in a knot at the base of her neck. Her eyes were also dark, her smile as unobtrusive as the rest of her.

It shouldn't have been too difficult to pick her out of a crowd, except when the crowd was attired in fancy costumes and elaborate masks. As Dante looked around the ballroom of the royal palace, he realized that he was surrounded by gods and goddesses and various mythological creatures, some that he recognized but many more than he did not. Even the staff were in costume: the waiters as slaves and the security guards as gladiators.

It was as if he'd stepped into another world, and he had to give credit to the decorators for their efforts. The boundary of the dance floor was marked by tall Roman-style columns wrapped in green ivy and twinkling lights. Beyond the dance floor were round tables covered in white linen with laurel wreath centerpieces. Marble pedestals topped with busts of ancient philosophers had been placed around the perimeter of the room.

Some of the guests were in formal attire and carried simple stick masks as a nod to the theme; others had elaborate costumes and face decorations that ensured they remained anonymous. For Dante, the one benefit of being unrecognizable in his costume was that he'd been able to forgo having bodyguards flanking him as he moved through the crowd.

He stepped out of Medusa's path and fought against a smile as she turned to give a blatant once-over to a centaur. He decided that even if he didn't manage to locate Princess Marissa, it wouldn't be a boring night. But he wasn't willing to give up on his mission just yet. He scanned the crowd again, looking for someone who was trying to blend into the background—an observer rather than a participant. The harder he looked, the more convinced he became that his task was futile.

And then he saw her.

The dress was of the richest emerald where it was gathered at one shoulder, with the color gradually transitioning from green to blue until it became a vivid sapphire at her ankles. Her hair spilled down her back, a luxurious cascade of silky red curls. Enormous hammered-gold earrings dangled from her ears and wide bracelets of the same style glinted at both wrists.

Her mask was an elaborate design studded with blue-and-green jewels with a fan of peacock feathers on one side; behind it, her brilliant green eyes ...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Ryan Barrett:

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